A Child's Story of American Literature

VII. The Marvelous Boy.

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WHEN Ben Franklin ran away from Boston he decided that Philadelphia was the best place to go to make his living as a printer. But when over a half century later William Cullen Bryant left home in the hope of helping to earn his living by his pen he thought the most promising place was New York.

The future of the young immigrants proved in several respects alike. Each lived to be pointed out in the streets as the leading citizen of his adopted city and as almost the foremost citizen of all America. Each enjoyed throughout his life, uninterruptedly except for flurries of political strife, the respect and esteem of the entire nation. The successful activities of both so widened on their hands that they were forced to change the direction of their early ambition, and they found afterward few moments of leisurely quiet in which to return to it. In both instances we feel that their country was greatly the gainer by this and that they at the same time lost nothing in reputation. No achievement of Franklin as scientist or inventor could have increased his fame as much as his services in establishing the new nation. And though Bryant found little freedom in his busy newspaper life to write the meditative, highly polished poetry he could write so well, he did enough to show that he could never have surpassed the work of his early days or even have changed the tone of it. On the other hand, there was no work more important to the nation or no one else better fitted to do it than that which he accomplished during his fifty years editorship of the New York *Evening Post*. The tremendous improvement in the literary quality and the moral tone of American journalism is due more to him than to any other single force in America.

In one respect, however, the boy emigrants were as different as any emigrants from Massachusetts could well be. Franklin owed nothing to his birthplace. The shrewd practicality of Boston was in no way unlike that of New York and Philadelphia. It was a quality, indeed, which all the Middle States shared in common with all the New Englanders. But Bryant came of the oldest Puritan stock. He was descended from John Alden and Priscilla, whose story you can read in "The Courtship of Miles Standish," written by another descendant of theirs. He had all the Puritan in his blood. Franklin in Philadelphia easily shook off, as we say, the dust of Boston from his shoes; but when Bryant went to New York he carried New England with him.

Still, for all he was a Puritan, he was born at the time when the Puritans had given up for a while their endless disputes about the nature of God and His relations to man, and had been swept, with the rest of America, into equally endless disputes about the nature of the Government and its relation to home rule. Every Tom, Dick and Harry, as you have seen, felt perfectly confident of his ability to make a better government than we had. So did William.

Perhaps you could find no more amusing illustration of this general confidence than this little Bryant boy, aged 10, up there in a tiny hamlet in western Massachusetts, writing his opinions to the country newspapers on how to run the Government. At the riper age of 13 he wrote a lengthy satire, not without poetical merit, calling upon President Thomas Jefferson to resign because he was incapable of managing the Government he had done so much to create a score of years ago. Long before the boy reached voting age he spoke of President Harrison as "His Imbecility" and advised open defiance of the Federal Government if it went to war with England, and said that Massachusetts ought to organize a standing army as a defense against the United States. However severely, nowadays, little boys and college freshmen may hear their fathers condemn the President for a difference in policy, they are not likely to hear of organizing an army to go down and force him to change his mind. Bryant, of course, lived to share with almost all the people of America a passionate devotion to the idea that the Union was more worth preserving than anything else. But at that time his mind was both all Puritan and all American in feeling passionately that only those who agreed with him had the right of the matter.

His temperament was Puritan in another important characteristic. He began to think of the grave before he got out of the cradle. And though his intense love and close observation of nature was in itself quite unlike the Puritans, it had a Puritan slant. Out of everything he saw there—flowers, woods, rivers, clouds, birds—he drew a moral lesson. It was not so much these things in themselves he wrote about—although his poetry showed that he looked at them very carefully—as their effect upon him. The thoughts they gave to him about his own nature rather than about theirs was what made them worth writing up. During his entire life, with only a few exceptions, he seems to have felt in the old Puritan manner that the only justification for writing poetry about natural objects was to use them as pegs to hang moral reflections upon. Sometimes they were cheering lessons, as well as solemn ones, but always they were lessons.

The ideas of running a government, which he gave to the world before he was 16, did not, as you may imagine, prove important. Also, you may imagine that the philosophy of life he put at the age of 17 into a poem called "Thanatopsis," which means a view of death, was equally unimportant. But there you would be greatly mistaken. No one has ever yet been able to explain the mystery of genius. And though perhaps nothing was more likely to be unimportant than a view of death held by a boy of 17, this poem happened to be about as satisfying and as perfect a thing of its kind as ever was written. Any language in any age of the world's history might be proud of it. No greatest poet of any country at the end of his life but would be glad to claim as his own the work of this boy at the beginning of his.

Its quality is what we call Greek. Perhaps we can make this plain by a comparison with Greek architecture. Did you ever see a Greek portico with its evenly spaced stately columns holding up its solid, dignified roof? It is simple, formal, cool, serene. No matter how blazing the sun is there are always quiet bands of shadow in it. No matter how dark the day, it seems to get more light than anything else. Even when you are right in front of it, there is something in its nature which makes it seem far away; and even when you stand within it you never seem to be really a part of it. That is why, even when such a portico is the entrance to a home or a place of business, there is nothing of the everyday world about it. It seems more permanent than the rest and as if it ought to belong to a temple. How should a farmer's boy in a little village in western Massachusetts get this quality of a Greek portico into his poem? There had been nothing like it, for all their talk of Athens, in the entire nation before.

That is what the editors of a magazine in Boston thought. Some years after the boy had written it, his father came across it, and with tears streaming down his face sent it to town to see if the editors would admire it as much as he did. It was with almost the same stirring of heart that they read it, and then stared at each other unbelievingly. Finally one of them said: "You have been deceived—no one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verse." When they printed it and another poem, "The Waterfowl," everybody with literary perception in America said the same thing: "Here are the greatest poems this country has ever produced."

Not having the money to go on with his college course Bryant had entered a lawyer's office to study law. Since now he had made suddenly this great reputation through a Boston magazine, naturally you would think he would have tried to combine law with literature in Boston. How was it then that he looked upon New York as a more promising place? Was not New York still, except in the minds of its inhabitants, a queer sort of Boeotia for a maker of Greek porticos to migrate to?

But since Charles Brockden Brown had left there in despair of making his living by his pen and returned to Philadelphia, things had been slightly improving. Two men, one of them destined to permanent fame, had successfully conducted for a while a gossipy, gay little magazine, which as Philadelphia began uneasily to feel, threatened her own supremacy as Athens. Other literary men plucked up their spirits and renewed the attempts to float magazines in a city whose harbor was now floating to it prosperity in everything else. It was the promise of a literary market which these gave that made Bryant decide for New York rather than for Boston. He guessed right, but not in the way he imagined.

He found there none of these hopeful, young writers rash enough to follow Brown's example and try to live by literature alone. Yet he determined to do so when one of these new magazines offered him $1,000 a year as editor. He thought he was in clover. "That is twice as much as I got by my law practice in the country!" he cried joyfully. But he exulted too soon. He found he couldn't make the magazine go or the one after it either and he saw that the only way he could live by his pen was to accept a position upon a newspaper. "Better politics and a full stomach," he said then, not so gayly, "than poetry and starvation." He had already been long enough at the latter, with all his reputation, to know what he was talking about. He had been five years selling the slender book which contained several new poems along with the two great ones he had published in the Boston magazine, and his total profit had been less than $15. No wonder, then, that when flushed with the great reputation he had brought with him to town as the author of "Thanatopsis" and "The Waterfowl," he himself and named $2 apiece as a very satisfactory remuneration for some poems which we now think almost as good.

The newspaper Bryant went upon is still running. It was as distinguished in that day as in this for its literary tone. When he joined it it was making a profit of $30,000 a year—in this town which couldn't support a magazine. Nothing in its career had given it more literary distinction and financial success than a series of bright satirical articles about New York business and society a few years before Bryant joined it. But so little was it considered that a writer of mere literature had a right to expect money for his work that the paper had paid nothing whatever for them to the two young men who helped Bryant and Irving and Cooper to turn the reputation of New York as Boeotia into that of Athens. Perhaps if Bryant had been the editor when Joseph Rodman Drake and Fitz-Greene Halleck were contributing for nothing so much distinction and popularity to the paper he would have felt, being a literary man himself, that a man of letters had as much right to payment for his work as a reporter of news. But though he lived to see many changes in literature as a paid profession he did not live long enough, patriarch, with a sweeping silver beard, as he became, to see it become a reliable one. And many years after he had been making a comfortable living as editor of the New York *Evening Post* he wrote: "An experience of twenty-five years has convinced me that poetry is an unprofitable trade—nobody cares a fig for it."

The gay papers of these two young men did not prove to be lasting literature. Some of their poetry did. Drake died at the age of 25, and his friend Halleck wrote a poem about him which still remains the sweetest and manliest tribute that one man has paid to another in our literature. In Drake's early death we seem to have sustained a considerable loss. For young as he was, he had done two very important things. One was our best patriotic poem up to that date. It is greatly superior to all our national anthems, but as we have no music to it, it did not, like them, stick in the popular mind. For our taste, it is disfigured by the noisy ranting which seems to have been demanded by patriotism in that day, but it has a great deal of real spirit, too. The other important thing he did was "The Culprit Fay." This is a poem, we still think as charming and graceful in its delicate fancy as they then thought it. But its chief importance does not consist in this alone. It is rather in the fact that, although everywhere recognized at the time as the best poem except "Thanatopsis" which had yet appeared, it had nothing Puritanical about it. Can you imagine anything further from a view of death than a fairy tale in verse? Here at last was a poet who said: "I don't see why you think good poetry must be so pious or so prim or so lofty or so heavy. I shall make a poem as dainty and as delightful as I can—and to do it, I shall get away as far possible from your old human notions which oblige you to be so serious." It was the first big step taken in America away from the Puritan tradition toward freeing poetry from the necessity of teaching a lesson.

But Bryant was all his life impressed with the sacredness of his poetic mission. Even when he wrote fairy tales in verse himself, as he did twice, he did not venture to do so without putting human beings in them with their background of human notions of right and wrong. One might almost say, indeed, that he kept on writing "Thanatopsis" and "The Waterfowl" until the end of his days. Though the new poems were most of them in the Greek portico style and some of them were very beautiful, he never bettered in age what he did in early youth. So, although his work as editor and as public spirited citizen has great importance in the development of the sense of our national responsibility, it seems better to us to remember him in our literature as the marvelous boy. It has not been given to many boys in the whole history of the world to write two poems which the world calls great.

Relics of Louis XVI.

LITTLE by little relics of the reign of Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette are disappearing in Paris. A treasure in itself, the beautiful mansion and the residence of Count Fersen, a fervent admirer of Marie Antoinette, is now to make place for a large avenue and a spacious square. Modern traffic demands that ancient buildings be sacrificed in the interest of up to date requirements.

The Hotel Fersen, situated in the rue Matignon, built on strictly Louis XVI. lines, is said to contain valuable treasures which are now likely to be dispersed. The mansion itself is to be demolished, and much regret is expressed at the disappearance of the many salons wherein Fersen was wont to court Marie Antoinette. The delicately painted and lofty rooms are full of tokens of bygone days. Tapestries made by Marie Antoinette herself and dedicated to her admirer long ago left the hotel and no one knows exactly their destination.

Because it was built on purely hygienic principles, high ceilings and big, open French windows, the mansion has had to undergo certain important modifications to allow it to become habitable. Rooms and salons have had to be cut in two, both in height and width, in many instances coming dangerously near to spoiling delicate architectural designs.

Count Fersen himself led a romantic life. Passionately in love with Louis XVI.'s companion and yet never successful in his suit, Fersen at one time exiled himself and went to America with Rochambeau with the object of forgetting and being forgotten. It was on his return from America covered with glory that he found the tapestry made by Marie Antoinette.

Till the end Fersen remained loyal to royalty. It was from the Hotel Fersen that he prepared the escape of Marie Antoinette. Disguised as a coachman Fersen himself drove the coach from the nearby hotel to the Tuileries, picked up the royal couple and drove them to Versailles. Previous to the drive Fersen had covered the royal arms on the coach with a fleur de lys and thereby avoided detection. His faithfulness, however, proved of no avail, for Louis had betrayed himself and his companion and by his many hesitations and imprudence fell into the hands of revolutionaries, who led him to the guillotine.

But little remains in the hotel to remind one of Count Fersen unless it be the little white and gold salon gayly decorated with tapestries, reminiscences of the old regime and that small and cozy boudoir, the favorite resting place of Marie Antoinette.